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For Immediate Release

Report: MCAS Scores in New Bedford Middle, High Schools Low Compared with State, Gateway Cities Averages

A report commissioned by the New Bedford Education Roundtable, hosted by the Community Foundation of Southeastern Massachusetts, shows that MCAS scores in New Bedford Public Schools have declined from elementary to middle and high school levels, and are low compared to not only state averages but those of similar “Gateway Cities.”

In particular, data shows that the NBPS student scores on the 2010 MCAS at the 7th grade level appear to plummet in comparison to their peers. The drop continues through the 8th grade and onto the 10th grade, where NBPS scores rank near the bottom in comparison to its peer communities.

The report by the UMass Dartmouth Urban Initiative, “Analysis of MCAS Performance/New Bedford Public Schools,” was commissioned in November 2010. The goals were to assess academic performance of New Bedford Public Schools and its students as measured by the MCAS, and to compare how they performed with Massachusetts students as a whole as well as those in similar cities (Brockton, Fall River, Fitchburg, Haverhill, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Pittsfield, Springfield, and Worcester). The report also assessed performance by grade levels and student subgroups such as race/ethnicity and family income.

While the data is mostly based on 2010 MCAS scores, the Urban Initiative also looked at scores from 2008 and 2009.

“This report demonstrates that our school system is broken and it needs fixing,” said John K. Bullard, President of Sea Education Association, former New Bedford Mayor, and Chair of the Roundtable. “As you read how our relative rank declines in higher grades it is hard to avoid the message that spending time in our school system is hazardous to one’s education...Our students start out well. But something wrong happens, especially in the seventh grade and we need to find out what it is.”

Bright spots were overall performance in the elementary schools, which outperform their Gateway City peers. Also of note was higher achievement at Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical High School and the Global Learning Charter School than in the New Bedford Public Schools. Only 46% of NBPS 10th graders scored proficient or advanced in the English Language Arts (ELA) portion of the 2010 MCAS, compared with 76% of Voc-Tech and 73% of Charter School 10th graders. On the 10th grade math section, 42% of NBPS students scored proficient or advanced, versus 78% of Charter School students and 77% of Voc-Tech students.

“This report seeks to peel back the range of myths from ‘we’re the worst’ to ‘everything is all right’”, said Rev. David Lima of the Inter-Church Council of Greater New Bedford, a member of the Roundtable. “There are grave concerns about our school system but there are also reasons for hope, areas that can be built upon. We must all know where we stand if we’re to know how to get to our destination. By understanding what must be done we can then all help to support and make the changes that will help NBPS excel.”

“This report is consistent with the research that United Inter-Faith Action has done in the past few years,” said Roundtable member Sister Marianna Sylvester of UIA. “When UIA parents, leaders, and community members have seen slides of similar statistics they register a sense of disbelief and outrage. The report strengthens our belief that the

system is broken and needs immediate corrective action, and reaffirms our commitment to work to make sure all students receive a quality education in New Bedford. "

Thomas Davis, Executive Director of the Greater New Bedford Industrial Foundation, emphasized that "while there has been significant improvement in the operations, safety, finances, economic development and cultural activities of the City of New Bedford during the last 10 years, the poor performance of the city's public middle schools and high school, excluding (Greater New Bedford) Voc-Tech and the (Global Learning) Charter School, needs to be urgently addressed and rectified."

The Education Roundtable is a forum of individuals and organizational representatives concerned about excellence in educational attainment in the New Bedford Public Schools, chaired by John Bullard and hosted by the Community Foundation. Roundtable members include representatives from the NAACP, United Inter-Faith Action, the Greater New Bedford Industrial Foundation, Inter-Church Council of Greater New Bedford, Women's Fund of Southeastern Massachusetts, the Island Foundation, the SouthCoast Development Partnership, and UMass Dartmouth.

"This is the first in what we hope will be several reports or analyses that this group will issue concerning the challenges and opportunities facing public education in New Bedford," said Community Foundation President Craig J. Dutra.

The report recommends several "next steps," including taking immediate, system and community-wide action; focusing on philosophies rather than programs; considering an expansion of student-centered thinking and programming; supporting additional research to allow for data-driven decision making; aspiring higher; and celebrating and replicating successes.

"Our expectation is that New Bedford students should achieve at the levels of our 'aspirant communities' - those cities that have high standards and performance that we want for all New Bedford students," said Carolee Matsumoto an education consultant and a Roundtable member.

To facilitate and support the recommendations, the Roundtable Group will engage in its own "next steps" that include:

- Identifying the root causes that result in unsatisfactory performance of the district.
- Focusing on the resulting consequences, such as drop outs and suspensions; and
- Creating the public will and capacity for changes by disseminating information via programs, the media, policy briefs, and panels.

"With this report, we must conclude that change is necessary and that the whole community must be involved," Mr. Bullard added. "Students, teachers, parents, administrators, union leaders, school committee members, parents and the community at large must take the information that is in this report and the ones that will follow and act.

"We must identify the people who are making the system work (and there are places it is working) and we must give them more responsibility. And we must find the places where the system is not working, such as the high school, Hayden McFadden and Dunbar, as well as the seventh grade, and we must make significant changes."

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Key Findings from Analysis of MCAS Performance/New Bedford Public Schools

New Bedford's Public Schools Underperformed in Comparison to their Peer Communities. In comparison to the state's Gateway Cities, over the last five years the NBPS have:

- Lost ground in both ELA and Math, falling behind the average of Gateway Cities in ELA.
- Of 10 indicators involving five student subgroups (Limited English Proficiency, Special Education, Low Income, African American, and Hispanic), the NBPS lost ground in seven, with the exceptions of special needs students in ELA and Math and Hispanic students in Math.
- Lost ground against the state average in ELA, even though the Gateway Cities, as a group, experienced a gain.

New Bedford Public Schools failed to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

- The NBPS performance in ELA and Math for 2010 caused it to not only fail in meeting AYP for both subjects in the aggregate, but also fail to meet AYP for each student subgroup as well.

There is Uneven Academic Progress from the 3rd Grade through the 10th Grade.

- ELA scores go from a ranking of 2nd among the 11 Gateway Cities in the elementary grades to 9th at the middle school level to last place in the 10th Grade.
- New Bedford is the only Gateway City whose ELA scores in the middle grades are lower than their elementary scores.
- The Math scores for NBPS go from the 2nd highest among Gateway Cities at the elementary level to 8th at the middle school level and 9th at the high school level.
- New Bedford and Lawrence are the only two Gateway Cities whose high school MCAS Math scores are lower than their elementary scores.

Low Student Growth Percentiles (SGP). The state's ability to assign student growth percentiles to MCAS performance gives us the opportunity to more fairly and accurately determine the progress schools make with students whose scores are similar to their "academic peers." SGP can control for differences in demographics and student achievement between schools and school districts. Specifically:

- New Bedford's SGP of 39% for all grades in ELA ranks it tied for last amongst the Gateway Cities and in the bottom 5% of school districts statewide.
- Its three-year average for ELA scores ranks at the lowest of the 11 Gateway Cities.
- Its 40% SGP for Math ranks it 10th among the 11 Gateway Cities.
- Its 24% SGP in both ELA and Math at the high school level is among the lowest in the state.

New Bedford's Elementary Schools Outperform their Gateway City Peers. The report describes this as "an incredibly positive strength given the growing body of research that indicates that success in a student's later years is predicated on their early academic history, particularly their ability to read by the third grade."

The Leadership of the NBPS has shown a Commitment to Introspection and New Planning,

An openness to utilizing this data and other analyses has been demonstrated by the Superintendent and key personnel in the school district.